

# Metrodora: A physician of late Byzantium on femininity

S. KOTSOPOULOS\*, A. FOTIOU\*\*

Metrodora is the author of a treatise entitled “Περὶ των γυναικείων παθῶν της μήτρας” (On the feminine diseases of the uterus). The manuscript exists in the Greek Codex 75 of the Laurentian Library in Florence. The manuscript is dated in the 12th century.

The existence of Metrodora’s manuscript has been known since the 19th century<sup>1</sup> but the full text was first presented by Aristotle Kousis at the Academy of Athens in 1945<sup>2</sup>. The text with an Italian translation was published by Giorgio Del Guerra in 1953 at Milan<sup>3</sup> and there has also been a more recent translation in French<sup>4</sup>.

The era the treatise was written is a matter of speculation. A systematic comparison of the text with other medical works from late antiquity and Byzantium may point to the sources of Metrodora’s book. Scarborough<sup>5</sup>, a distinguished historian of medicine in Byzantium, suggested that the treatise was perhaps a ‘handbook’, one of those compiled in the first half of the 10th century during the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus and that this handbook was similar to Trotula’s treatise of the Latin tradition<sup>6</sup>.

Metrodora’s name is compound of two words ‘μήτρα (uterus) or μήτηρ (mother) and δῶρα’(gifts) and may be considered a nickname for a compiler who had drawn from books of medical authors of earlier times. The grammar of the text with the use of past participle in masculine forms e.g. λειώσας, ζέσας, τρίψας etc, instead of λειώσασα, ζέσασα, τρίψασα etc., suggests that Metrodora was either a female author who did not adjust the text to fit a female author or that the author was male who invented a female name to make the book acceptable to women.

Trotula was a legendary physician from Salerno to whom a treatise on the diseases of women and the care of children was attributed. Under ‘Trotula’ the writings of women physicians and midwives were widely circulated in medieval Europe<sup>7,8</sup>.

To think of Byzantium and femininity in combination it is rather unusual<sup>7</sup>. Byzantium has been considered a conservative male dominated society. But, women, par-

ticularly of aristocracy, occupied an important position in the higher echelons of the empire as wives, mothers or daughters of men in power. In general, the role of women was to run the house and have children or if they so choose to remain virgins. Men on the other hand were permitted to have concubines, usually women of low socioeconomic classes<sup>9</sup>.

The role of women in the family and the community evolved, particularly in the 11th century. The family in large urban centers increasingly took the form of the nuclear family<sup>9</sup> as we know it in our times. Women also became involved in activities outside their homes particularly in small business for the manufacture and trade of fabrics<sup>10</sup>. In such a cultural environment esthetics of the body were not likely neglected.

Metrodora’s treatise consists of brief prescriptions addressing problems specific to femininity. Here we present those prescriptions which may relate to the psychological aspects of femininity. There were prescriptions for men on how to control the sexuality of women (λε, λς, λξ). There were also prescriptions for women on how to pursue an ideal youthful appearance in order to become more attractive to men.

The prescriptions made extensive use of pharmaceutical substances. They also included magical elements (λς, λζ, μγ) which constituted a major departure from Hippocratic medicine of earlier times.

Trotula’s manuscript<sup>5</sup> contains two prescriptions with objectives similar to two by Metrodora presented in this paper. One is about sexuality, the other is about beauty. Trotula’s prescription 35 ‘On the manner of tightening the vulva so that even a woman who has been seduced may appear a virgin’ addresses the same problem as Metrodora’s prescription λδ’. Trotula’s prescription is elaborate in comparison to Metrodora’s. Substances used in the two prescriptions are not similar although the methods of application are the same. The second prescription, 61 ‘On adornment and whitening of the face’ has similar objectives to prescription νς’ by Metrodora ‘To make the face white and smooth’. Here

\* MD, Phd

\*\* PhD Professor Emeritus University of Carleton

again the methods of application are similar but the substances used are different.

**λδ' For a woman to appear virgin while she is not**

Apply crushed symphytum plant\* or douche with alum boiled with bay leaves

\*symphytum officinale, compfrey

**λε' To find out if a woman is a virgin**

Have the woman urinate in a pot where you have put fresh lentils, if the lentils disperse she is a virgin, if not she is not a virgin

**Other.** Burn lignite stone and if she urinates in her pants she is not a virgin. If she does not, she is a virgin

**λς' For a woman not to commit adultery**

Apply on your male organ bile of the fish called kavros\* and have sexual intercourse with her and she will never commit adultery with anyone

**Try this.** Crack eggs of yraskon and apply on your organ and have intercourse with her, if you also use that of kavros there will never be a man who will sleep with her

\* γαύρος

**λζ' To disclose those she has committed adultery with**

Give her drink crushed magnate stone in pure wine and on that day she should not take a bath and in the evening when she goes to bed give her this to drink and she should not eat anything else. In the night sleep with her and she will disclose whom she has slept with.

**Other.** Place on her heart, while she is sleeping, the two-headed bone of orripsios the emeros and she will reveal whom she desires and who she has slept with. Alyssum plant\* can have the same result.

\*alyssum clypeatum

**μα' How to maintain small breasts**

Apply plaster of crushed Melissa plant\* on the breast carefully and not beyond its boundaries, or plaster of hemlock for three days, or saddle the breast for three days with plaster made of crushed poppy seeds baked with rain water.

\*melissa officinalis

**μβ' How to restore drooping breasts**

Cover [the breast] with fuller's earth\*, one part, and spray with a little honey, or apply white lead paste mixed with hyoschiamos pap and thinned, as needed, with oil of the shrub schinos.

\*A mixture used by fullers to soften clothes.

**μδ' How keep the breasts small and upright**

Take root of psillium, while the moon is waning, and apply to the breasts and bandage them together. To test [the remedy] apply psillium to the area where the horns of a young ram or calf are situated and if the horns have already sprouted they will not grow longer. If the horns had not sprouted they will not come out. Melissa plant produces the same results.

**Other.** Mix crushed hemlock with two parts of scrapings of alum, two parts of sour grape juice, together with dry wine to form the texture of ointment, then spread on the breast in circles. Over it apply samian soil\* and chalk or white lead.

\*From Samos

**με' How to make the breasts smooth and beautiful**

Apply [crushed leaves] of bitter vetch dissolved in fragrant wine, or fenugreek boiled in wine and dissolved, or similarly dissolved linseeds or barley pap or semolina with wine, or similarly prepared starch or wine lead paste and litharge\* dissolved with wine.

\*red crystalline lead monoxide

**μς' To make the face white and smooth**

Apply and wash, late in the evening and in the morning, aluminum white dissolved in water, or chian soil\* or chalk or soda or litharge in equal parts dissolved in vinegar in vinegar.

\*from Chios

**μζ' To make the face radiant**

This was used by Veronike the Queen of Egypt who was also called Cleopatra. She put deerhorn in empty pot, baked in oven and when she took it out she found it all white. She dissolved in milk and applied it.

**Other.** Apply melanthium and fenugreek and linseeds in fragrant wine.

**νθ' To make the face smooth**

Apply starch, ervum and emolina with the white of the egg, or oats pap, or barley pap with honey.

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